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Why donors demand immediate elections after unrest in developing countries

By Haley Swedlund December 11, 2015



Supporters of President-elect Roch Marc Kaboré cheer at Kaboré's campaign headquarters in Ouagadougou on Dec. 1. Roch Marc Kaboré was proclaimed the winner of the presidential election in Burkina Faso and will become the country's first new leader in decades, the Independent National Electoral Commission said Tuesday. (Joe Penney/Reuters)

On Nov. 29, citizens of Burkina Faso went to the polls to elect a new president and 127 members of parliament. These elections followed a turbulent year for the West African nation. In October 2014, former president Blaise Compaoré was displaced after mass protests undermined his attempts to change the constitution, which would have allowed him to extend his 27-year-long grip on power. Following Compaoré's departure, a transitional government led by Michel Kafando was installed and national elections were scheduled for mid-October 2015.

Plans changed, however, on Sept. 16 when a faction of the national army — the presidential guard (known by its French acronym, the RSP) — stormed the Presidential Palace during a cabinet meeting, apprehending President Kafando and three other senior members of the transitional government. The following day, it was announced on state TV that the transitional government had been dissolved and the commander of the presidential guard, General Gilbert Diendéré, was now in charge of the country.

The RSP and Diendéré's attempts at a coup d'état, however, were short-lived. Following 10 tense days, which officially cost the lives of 14 citizens, the transitional government led by Kafando was reinstated and the elections were rescheduled for the end of November.

On Dec. 1, it was announced that Roch Marc Christian Kaboré won the election with more than 50 percent of the vote and that Kaboré's party — the People's Movement for Progress (known by its French abbreviation MPP) — also won a plurality of the seats in parliament. It has also subsequently been announced that Diendéré, who is being held in detention for his role in the failed coup, has been charged with complicity in the 1987 assassination of former president Thomas Sankara, who was murdered in the coup that brought Compaoré to power.

Throughout the transition period and despite the September coup attempt, international donors have consistently and vocally pushed for elections to take place as quickly as possible. The United States, for example, issued a news release Sept. 30, 2015, arguing that, "It is of utmost importance that the transitional government continues its efforts to hold transparent, free, and credible national elections as soon as possible."

International donors also poured millions of dollars into supporting the election. In July, for example, the European Union signed a €120 million budget support agreement with the transitional government, which was intended to keep the government afloat and support the organization of the forthcoming elections. Other donors supported the government via NGOs, such as the National Democratic Institute (NDI); a pooled funding envelope organized by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP); and through material goods, such as pickup trucks from Nigeria and computers from Taiwan.

Burkina Faso is not the only place where donors have pushed for quick elections to end a transitional period. In the Central Africa Republic — a country that has been plagued by violence and instability in recent years — donors are pushing for elections to take place at the end of December despite concerns about renewed election violence.

Why is it that during periods of transition, donors place so much emphasis on quick elections, prioritizing election support over other forms of democracy promotion and governance-related programming? Qualitative research on the role of donors in elections elsewhere in Africa suggests that donors are often apologists for dictatorships, and that the promotion of a rapid transition to multiparty by donors may actually impede further democratization efforts. Consistent with these qualitative findings, statistical analysis on the relationship between foreign aid and democracy suggests that at best foreign aid has a marginal effect on democratization. Is donor support for elections merely window-dressing?

Interviews I conducted with donor officials working for a variety of governmental aid agencies in Burkina Faso in October 2015 suggest that electoral support is more than a perfunctory act. That does not mean, however, that the focus on elections is reflective of a deep commitment to democratization or multipartyism.

My findings suggest that donor agencies commit time and money to promoting elections for a simple, functional reason: For development practitioners to do their job they need a legitimate, stable partner with whom they can engage. In transition periods, this is lacking. Therefore, donor officials are keen to move as quickly as possible out of the transition period.

Uncertainty regarding political leadership has several practical implications on the daily tasks and professional aspirations of development practitioners. Political uncertainties often result in the suspension (formally or informally) of ongoing aid projects and programs that donor officials have spent a long time developing and implementing. This is not only costly for the intended beneficiaries but can affect the professional ambitions of aid workers. Development practitioners count on the successful implementation of aid projects to advance professionally.

Furthermore, if temporary freezes on aid become permanent, donor officials will be forced to pack their bags and head home. When suspensions go on for too long, donor agencies may face a cut in their annual budget, resulting in a decline in both resources and staff. In an already unstable funding situation, this is something donor officials want to avoid. Once aid is cut, it is frequently difficult to reinstate.

Even if aid isn't frozen or suspended, transitional periods make daily tasks more challenging. Donor officials heavily invest in building relationships with their counterparts in government. Following a change in government, these relationships disappear, and officials are keen to begin to reestablish these relationships as quickly as possible, so that they can get on with doing the job they were sent there to do: disburse aid.

Finally, the tasks of donor agencies are made easier with a functioning government that has national frameworks and strategies in place. At least officially, most donor agencies align their priorities with the recipient country's national development plan. In Burkina Faso's case, this is the Strategy for Accelerated Growth and Sustainable Development (known by its French acronym the SCADD). The SCADD is up at the end of 2015 and approval was on hold during the transitional period.

These observations from Burkina Faso are consistent with survey research I conducted across twenty African countries in 2014. In this case, I found that willingness of donor agencies to sanction recipient governments for political transgressions is not just dependent on the strategic interests of donor countries, but also on the motivations and interests of the donor agency itself. Similarly, more specialized research on democratic promotion by international NGOs suggests that the organizational incentives of these agencies are an important, but often overlooked, part of the story.

When donor agencies engage in democracy promotion, they don't just bring along the normative objectives and the strategic interests of their funders. They are also motivated by much more mundane organizational incentives.

In the case of Burkina Faso, quick elections may have been the smart move. This is not, however, necessarily the case everywhere. Unfortunately, in practice, decision-making is often driven by the functional needs of particular agencies, rather than a sound assessment of the political situation in the recipient country. With only limited funding available, this pattern of behavior means that more fundamental democratic reforms are often sidelined in favor of the ballot box.

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